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Black Habits and White Collars: Representations of the Irish Industrial Schools

Peter Guy

1 What were the Industrial Schools? The journalist Bruce Arnold offers us an accurate summary:

> During the greater part of the twentieth century the Irish State owned and managed a prison system for children spread across the whole of the Republic [...] [T]hese were places of shame in the communities where they were located and they were shameful places. In a country where everyone expected to know the business of other people and to know what was going on about them, there were these juvenile prisons [...] the majority of the prisons were known as industrial schools; a tiny minority of parallel institutions [...] were reformatories. Together with certain other establishments for children who were euphemistically described as being 'in care', these institutions in reality constituted an "Irish Gulag[1]."

2 Arnold states that the appearance of these children made people uneasy but a more pertinent question is whether people were fully aware of the systematic abuse that was perpetuated against these innocent children by the religious orders and lay employees that ran them thanks largely to State cooperation and funding. Arnold is scathing at the way in which the Irish State has avoided full responsibility, particularly in the manner in which they have repeatedly cited ignorance of the horrendous abuse that occurred in these schools. It is evident that the State is indeed partly culpable, as they have formed a redress board to compensate victims of institutional abuse. Nevertheless, they appear as distressed at the prospect of dealing with the trauma of the revelations as the victims are of dealing with the trauma of the crime perpetrated on them. Both Fintan O' Toole, in an article in for *The Irish Times*, and Eamon Maher, in Tony Flannery's *Responding to the Ryan Report* drew analogies between the Industrial Schools and the Gulags. For O'Toole:

> Ireland sustained a system of prison camps for kids and allowed them to be run with arbitrary violence, utter depravity and a sense of absolute impunity [...] some of the methods used in the industrial schools are queasily reminiscent of images

> from gulags or concentration camps: the shaved heads; the use of humiliation and disorientation to destroy the inmate's sense of personal identity; the turning of fire hoses on inmates; the setting of dogs on inmates; the beating of inmates while they were hanging from hooks on a wall[2].

3 And for Maher:

> Essentially, we in Ireland allowed prison camps to be created for children, places where male and female religious acted outside of the rule of law. In fact, they were allowed to establish and enact the laws according to which these corrective schools were run, with little or no interference from the State[3].

4 This chapter aims to look at the question of culpability and it lays out in exact details fictional and non-fictional accounts of abuse, the historical context in which this abuse occurred and why the question of blame is such a complex issue. That is, it questions the assumption of hindsight. "Had we known, we would have intervened" is an archetypical response to the revelations that have come out about Industrial schools thanks to the Ryan Report, but it is a less than honest reaction in my view. Not deliberately mendacious perhaps, but rather, a reaction to a series of psychological factors that cannot be ignored. For this chapter, I will be examining the biographical accounts of life in the schools by Mannix Flynn, Peter Tyrell, Patrick Touher and Paddy Doyle as well as fictive representations by such writers as Bernard McLaverty, John McGahern, Pat McCabe and Walter Macken. The accounts of life in the Industrial Schools, whether they are fictive or biographical, can be placed within the genre of prison-camp or gulag memoirs. The prison-camp memoir has been perceived as a codified new narrative genre since the late sixties. They resemble the North American slave narratives in that they are written either by non-professional writers or by authors whose talents are revealed in this, their first literary endeavour.

5 In prison camp narratives, an ethical concern tends to prevail over psychological or socio-political one. The main motivation for the narrator is to attest and give evidence towards the unspeakable crimes they witnessed. This is often reflected in the titles such as Vladimir V. Tchernavin's *I Speak for the Silent* (1935) or Jerzy Glicksman's *Tell the West* (1948). The artistic merit of biographical accounts over fictive accounts is that, memoirs published soon after the authors' release often have a heightened aesthetic appeal. The experience was still fresh for the authors, still fraught with emotion and the process of going public with their revelations was cathartic. Certainly, the ethical integrity of their conduct in the camps or industrial schools can irradiate upon the text and become a source of aesthetic appeal in its own right. In the Soviet Union such texts could be smuggled out and posted in the West. In Ireland, given the totemic nature of the Church, former inmates were more reticent, conscious perhaps of the social stigma (Macken and McGahern) or thwarted by publishers who had no wish to alienate their Catholic audience (Tyrell).

6 The fictive accounts are not always ethically orientated; some are there for the pleasure of narration. Mannix Flynn's memoir *Nothing to Say* is highly stylized for example. To some extent, the story-telling impulse asserts itself in all the writings of the survivors. Telling a good story, complete with striking particulars, was, moreover, pragmatically justified by the consciousness-raising agenda – it promised wider-audiences. Since Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*, prison narratives have tended to combine stories of individual experience with accounts of shared suffering and common shame. The difference between a memoir and a fictive account is that, the attitude of the memoirist is as focaliser who shares the common lot of his fellow

inmates whilst a narrative voice belongs to a separate individual with his own biases and affiliations. The focalisers in the biographical accounts have no distinctive personal features apart from a wide-eyed innocence and the wish to survive. In fictive accounts, these figures are imbued with a more assured personality. Thus Bill Evan's in McGahern's *That They May Face The Rising Sun* is something of a composite figure, drawn up from both the author's own experience and outlook.

7 A memoir lapses when the author begins to foreground the self in the narrative. Thus the conclusion to Flynn's *Nothing to Say* appears chimerical. A father of one of the boys is horrified by the bloodied condition of his son and punches one of the Christian Brothers in the face, calling him a "rotten poxy bastard[4]." This is clearly wish-fulfilment, a crowd pleasing finale where the antagonist gets a taste of his own medicine. The prison memoir usually contains a specific set of topoi with recurrent structural features. Beginning with the arrest or conviction, there is then the matter of deconstruction of the narrator's dignity. The account is usually written in clearly defined stages of their period of incarceration. This is especially true in, say, Tyrell's memoir. Also inherent in the prison-camp memoir are themes of escape, torture, moments of reprieve, chance and then a somewhat laconic account of their freedom.

8 There are few fictive accounts of the industrial schools in Ireland. In the novels of McGahern and Macken, the reference is fleeting. McCabe is more explicit in his treatment but the tone is carnivalesque and not in keep with the Lenten narrative that is inherent in the memoir. The critical distance between memoir and fiction comes down to the tension between the ethical drive and the aesthetic impulse, closely associated with the bi-functionality of prison camp narratives as acts of witness bearing and as works of art. That is, the difference between the teller and the tale.

9 The ethical concern is immediately obvious in one such account, Paddy Doyle's 1988 memoir *The God Squad*, where he states in his preface:

> Many people familiar with the effects of institutional care, particularly Industrial Schools, will say I have gone too easy on them. Lives have been ruined by the tyrannical rule and lack of love in such places. People have been scarred for life. This book is not an attempt to point the finger, to blame or even to criticise any individual or group of people. Neither is it intended to make a judgement on what happened to me. It is about a society's abdication of responsibility to a child. The fact that I was that child, and the book is about my life is largely irrelevant. The probability is that there were, and still are, thousands of "me's"[5].

10 The "God Squad" of the title refers to a group of nuns who prepare patients for surgery and contact the hospital chaplain for those wishing to have their confessions heard. They play only a brief role in the memoir. In stark contrast are the sisters at St. Michael's industrial school, where Doyle spent a year and a half, who are seen as autocratic and vindictive. Mother Paul, the nun who dominates Doyle's memoir, articulates the social role expected of the nuns who run the institution:

> When we had finished singing Mother Paul reminded us that as we had no parents it fell to the nuns to give us the guidance and grace that would make us into fine young men. Nuns were married to God she said as she raised her right hand to show a thin silver ring. Nuns did not have children in the way mothers had. "Each of you was sent to St. Michael's by God and you will be trained in the manner He would like. Mark my words, you will all one day be proud to have been part of this school[6]."

11 However, the treatment meted out to the children at St. Michael's falls far short of "guidance and grace". Mother Paul repeatedly reprimands Doyle for his lameness and

the nightmares he has of his father's suicide. Doyle's story also makes clear how the taint of sin and the assumption of culpability bore heavily upon the children sent to industrial schools:

> Not all the children inside St. Michael's were orphaned; many came from broken homes or domestic situations into which they simply didn't fit. Inside the school there was a clear distinction between those who had parents and those who had not. Those who did have a father or mother alive who was alcoholic were often berated by the nuns. "Is it any wonder your poor father took to drinking. The poor man must have been at his wits end trying to manage you." I don't know if any of the other children there had parents who committed the mortal sin of suicide. If there were, then like me, they were probably kept in ignorance[7].

12 Patrick Touher, in his 1991 memoir, *Fear of the Collar*, recounts the physical and sexual abuses exacted on the boys of Artane Industrial School and their persistent sense of fear, shame and confusion. He recalls an encounter with a brother nicknamed The Sting, who was later removed from Artane. Touher, nicknamed Collie by his friends, is caught by The Sting after climbing over a wall to collect chestnuts. The Sting tells Touher he will deal with him that night at eight o'clock. After the brother leaves, the other boys warn Touher that The Sting routinely beats and fondles them: "You know, Collie, he hurt me privates. As he beat me with one hand, he held me with the other hand. He had me lie across the bed sat beside me, started stroking me bottom, then beating me at times with his leather[8]." That night Touher obediently arrives at the brother's room: "The Sting stood in front of me and said, 'Well, you have to learn how to keep out of trouble now, won't you, boy?' I said, 'Yes, sir, I will in future, sir.' 'I know you will, boy, I will teach you the hard way. Take off that nightshirt; you will not need it for a while'[9]". The Sting beats and then sexually molests Touher, after which the brother weeps, holds the crying boy in his arms, promising never to beat him again. While Touher claims that he was never sexually abused again in Artane, he was – like the other boys confined in that industrial school – a victim of other forms of abuse and intimidation.

13 A fictive account of life in the Industrial Schools appeared in 1983 with the publication of Bernard McLaverty's *Lamb*. The first chapter of *Lamb* takes place in a reform school for young boys situated in a remote part of western Ireland. The Home, as it is called, is run by a religious order of brothers, headed by Brother Benedict, a tyrannical disciplinarian who revels in his clerical power. In his opening conversation with the younger, more compassionate Brother Sebastian, Benedict espouses his brutal philosophy:

> What we run here is a school for the sons of the Idle Poor. We teach them to conform, how to make their beds, how to hold a knife and fork, and the three Rs. We shoehorn them back into society at an age when, if they commit another offence, they go to the grown-up prison. If they do not conform we thrash them. We teach them a little of God and a lot of fear. It is a combination that seems to work. At least *we* think so. There is no room here for your soft-centred, self-centred idealism[10].

14 Sebastian decides to leave the school and the Brothers, taking with him a twelve-year-old epileptic Dublin boy, Owen Kane, with whom he has developed a relationship of tentative trust. Believing that "the saving of an individual was more important than the law", Sebastian, whose real name is Michael Lamb, flees to London, using money willed to him by his recently deceased father. While in London Michael begins to think of his life in the brothers and sees it all as a handful of negatives in his life. He also realizes

that he cannot continue to wander around London and escape detection. They decide to return to Ireland, as it will be the place where people will least suspect them to be. Michael gets a plane to Ireland with Owen and they travel to Donegal. Michael knows that there is no hope for either of them sustaining this type of lifestyle. He decides to substitute Owen's tablets for aspirins and they go to a beach in Donegal. Michael wants to protect Owen from returning to the brutality of the Home. Owen has a fit and Michael brings him over to the edge of the water and drowns him there and then makes a vain attempt to commit suicide. The narrative ends with Michael's anguished realisation that what began in love has ended in evil: "He had started with a pure loving simple ideal but it had gone foul on him, turned inevitably into something evil. It had been like this all his life, with the Brothers, with the very country he came from[11]."

15 Contrarily, the Galway novelist Walter Macken was one of the few writers who wrote of the stigma of the Industrial School during the high-point of Catholic dominancy. His 1952 novel *The Bogman* opens with an account of Cahal Kinsella's homecoming from the Industrial School and a chance meeting with a neighbour on the road home. The man, Peader Clancy, tries vainly to identify him at first before finally exclaiming, "'By the cross of God,' he shouted then, 'you're Nan Kinsella's bastard!"

> Cahal first felt his face going cold and then red and finally the whole complex burst its way out of him in a shout of laughter. Think of the years. Think of the fairy tales in the school, accounting for the fact that you had parents so uninterested in you to fire you into an Industrial School at the age of six. There could only be two reasons, the main ones, poverty and illegitimacy. Think of the romantic tales that you had concocted to cover the yearnings and puzzlement. Think of all that and see it soar away on the wings of a loud laugh at the voice of a drunken old man[12].

16 Later in the novel, Cahal attempts to explain away his attachment to his abusive and malevolent grandfather, Barney Kinsella, by stating that, while he has no love for the man, he respects him as one of his own:

> All me life I have lived at the orders of impersonal men in a tight place. There were rules to keep. We kep' them. If we didn't we were punished, impersonally, cold-bloodedly [...] I like Barney to say, Come, and I come, and go, and I go. For why? Because he is somebody belonging to me. That's why. You don't know what it is to be live among hundreds and have none of your own, to be comin' and goin' at the call of strangers to whom you mean nothin' but so many shillin' subsidy a week from the Government[13].

17 Others were so tormented by their experience in the Industrial Schools that they physically could not speak of what occurred. In John McGahern's *That They May Face The Rising Sun*, we are introduced to the character of Bill Evans, a former inmate hired out to a sadistic farmer in Leitrim. The protagonist, Ruttledge, a character loosely based upon McGahern himself, attempts to draw Bill into talking about his past:

> "Weren't you in a place run by Brother's and priests before they sent you to the first farm?" [...] [A] troubled look passed across Bill Evan's face as swiftly as a shadow of a bird passing across window light and was replaced by black truculence. "Before the priests and Brothers weren't you with nuns in a convent with other small boys? Weren't you treated better when you were small and with the nuns?" This time there was no long pause. A look of rage and pain crossed his face. "Stop torturing me" he cried out[14].

18 Ruttledge recalls an incident where, as a student, he witnessed the beating of one of these boys: "They were sent as skivvies to the colleges; they scrubbed and polished floors, emptied garbage and waited at tables in the college Ruttledge attended[15]." On

this occasion, one of the boys at serve accidentally careers into the dean of students, "plates and bowls went flying. The soutane was splashed." The boy breaks the rule of silence whereupon the brother begins to beat him:

> The beating was sudden and savage. Nobody ate a morsel at any of the tables while it was taking place. Not a word was uttered. In the sobbing aftermath the silence was deep and accusing until the scrape of knife and fork on plate and the low hum of conversation returned. Many who sat mutely at the tables during the beating were to feel all their lives that they had taken part in the beating through their self-protective silence[16].

19 In Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, the protagonist, Francie Brady, is sent to an Industrial School which is described as, "the house of a hundred windows[17]." Francie avidly reads up on miraculous visions and hopes to attain some form of favourable reward by reporting mock visitations of St Joseph, the Angel Gabriel, St Catherine – "the more the merrier." A Father Sullivan, nicknamed Father Tiddly, takes him under his wing and begins to sexually abuse him. In Francie's skewered vision of reality, cigarettes and Rolos are sufficient compensation for Tiddly's depraved attentions: "Tiddly said wouldn't it be lovely if we could get married. I said it would be great. I could buy you flowers and chocolates and you could have dinner ready when I come home he says[18]." When he emerges from the Industrial School, he meets his boyhood friend Joe Purcell and again, as with other former inmates, cannot fully disclose what occurred to him:

> He kept going back to the other thing so in the end I told him and what does he say then he says Francie he didn't really do that did he? I said what are you talking about Joe he did didn't I just tell you? The next thing I knew I was in a cold sweat because of the way Joe was looking at me [...] it was only for a split second our eyes met but he knew and I knew. Then I said: I fairly fooled you there Joe. Tiddly! Imagine someone doing the like of that! Tiddly! Rolos – for fuck's sake[19]!

20 The accounts of life in the Industrial Schools are unanimous in this – the shame and fear of speaking out, of being singled out as an aberration. One of the earliest published accounts of life in the Industrial School appeared in 1983 with Mannix Flynn's *Nothing to Say*. Flynn's thinly disguised autobiographical character, Gerard O'Neill, is dispatched to St. Joseph's Industrial School in Letterfrack after a long history of petty crimes and truancy. At the court hearing to determine his case, the judge notes:

> "Mrs. O'Neill," said the Judge, "You are a sick woman. You have thirteen other children who need looking after. You cannot spend your life running around after Gerard." The Judge turned to the Probation Officer and asked for the report [...] "Comes from a family of fourteen, the youngest about three years of age. Father works in the cleaning Department of the Corporation. There is also a drinking problem from the father and constant marriage break-ups[20]."

21 Mary Raftery and Eoin O'Sullivan, in their authoritative account of life in the Industrial Schools, *Suffer the Little Children* (1999), contend that the "Industrial schools were designed for the children of the poor, who were perceived as a threat to the social order. It was these children who were inevitably targeted for incarceration[21]..." Arnold would state that Letterfrack was "arguably the worst" of all the Industrial Schools and Flynn's account of life there confirms this – he was raped, beaten and repeatedly abused during his tenure there[22]. In a later interview with the journalist Brighid McLaughlin he elaborates further on life in Letterfrack :

> I was eleven when I was sent to Letterfrack industrial school. Letterfrack in beautiful Connemara was this State's idea of a Special School for Special Needs. The only thing special about it was its exalted position as the monster terror hole of

> sub-human abuse of children. For me, it was a completely traumatic experience... It was like been pulled out of the Rotunda and put into a major war zone. That was the kind of life it was. Every night, we all cried out for our mammies and daddies. I can still hear the blood-curdling screams. I was in Letterfrack for two years, they don't let you out for Christmas until after the first year. Some kids never got out because they had no family. Looking back on it now they were tormented. They had nobody to visit them, to write to them, an awful lot of those boyo's didn't survive. All the stories that are coming out about it are true[23].

22 Flynn's autobiographical account is offset with that of another inmate, Peter Tyrrell, who wrote of his experience in Letterfrack during the period 1924-1931. Published in 2006, *Founded on Fear* is as harrowing an account as that of Flynn's but Tyrrell's work is without any stylistic flourishes – it is told in a plain, simple style and is all the more devastating for it – in one episode he recounts the sadistic behaviour of a Brother Vale, the school's designated cook:

> I went into the scullery a few days ago and there were two boys washing dishes in the sink, Stapelton and Sharkey, and as they worked he flogged them from behind, as usual I asked Joe Baker, why it is that the rubber is so terribly painful and he explained that the rubber which Vale is using is the rim of the tyre, and is reinforced with wire which is running through it (steel wire). I have now been beaten several times daily for weeks, and when I go to the refectory for meals my hands are sweating. My sight is blurred and I am unsteady in my feet. I feel hungry but when I eat the food will not stay down. I am now weak, and as I walk along find it difficult to keep my balance[24].

23 Tyrrell's account of life in Letterfrack went unpublished for nearly forty years. He wrote of his experiences in the late fifties and entrusted the document to Senator Owen Sheehy Skeffington who attempted to find a publisher for the memoir without success. Skeffington would die of a heart-attack some two years after receiving Tyrrell's account and it remained amongst his unpublished papers. By then, Tyrrell had committed suicide on Hampstead Heath.

24 On page 62 of *Founded on Fear*, Tyrell gives a description of the handyman John Cusack, "who does all the repairs to the property", describing him as "[V]ery good to the children and often brings them food from his home [...] he is always friendly and has a kind word for everyone[25]." Cusack was my great grandfather. I was born within sight of the Industrial School and two generations of my paternal family worked there until its closure in 1974. For a brief period, I myself was a student – by a curious twist of fate I spent a year there as a student of the Galway-Mayo Technical Institute engaged in furniture design and production. No-one in my family spoke of the industrial school though it loomed large in the psyche of the community – Letterfrack village is dominated by the main building and workshops, the infirmary and monastery where the brothers lived. The main buildings are now utilized, as I mentioned, by GMIT and the school has gained an international reputation in the field of wood design and restoration. The monastery is used as a hostel. The exercise yard where Tyrell first encounters the brutality of the regime ("a Christian brother now comes running out, he is chasing the young children with a very long stick and beating them on the backs of the legs[26]") is now home to a café and library. A hundred yards north of the yard a modern-looking crèche has been built.

25 In the Ryan Report, the section on Letterfrack is a damning indictment of abuse and official negligence. In one section where a boy was forced to eat his own excrement, the Brother involved states:

> "Well the [...] thing has haunted me all my life. It should never have happened. Actually he didn't eat the excrement, he spat it into the basin, that doesn't matter, it was wrong, totally wrong, and I accept that. I accept full responsibility for it. It was cruel." When asked by the Committee why he did it, he said that he was stressed by having to cope with boys who soiled themselves, particularly during the night. He asked colleagues what he should do about one particular boy: "A few days before I mentioned this to some of the staff, 'what will I do', I couldn't get any help from anybody. One of them quite cynically said, 'make him eat his own shit'". When I think now on this particular morning, he did it right out in the floor in front of everybody and I saw red, I saw anger, I thought he was doing it purposefully to ridicule me. I think that was the reason[27]."

26 In Letterfrack, as in other communities which housed the schools, the sense of guilt is pervasive. It has become a place of shame and thirty years is insufficient to wipe away the trauma of the past. The accounts of life in the Schools have a number of discernable similarities – sexual abuse, the sense of ostracisation, of fear and neglect. However, there was neither a sympathetic audience nor, it must be said, a tolerant one for such revelations of abuse. The emergence of such testaments, drip-fed into the Irish psyche over the course of twenty years, was at first met with scepticism, disgust and, latterly, anger at such revelations. But what were the conditions that allowed such systematic abuse to thrive?

27 Catholicism has generally seen sexual desire in a negative light and this became the hallmark for Irish society from the foundation of the State to the early nineties. The first instinct of the Church when revelations about sexual abuse emerged was typical: they simply chose to try and sweep it under the carpet. But the reservoir of repression and deceit at the sick heart of Ireland had been festering for too long and papering over the cracks had been a policy that worked only when people were willing to accept blindly the dictates of the Bishops. By the early nineteen-nineties that was no longer the case and, like the metaphorical image of Berlin Wall, once the first section collapsed, the rest followed with astonishing rapidity. Simply put, the Church was swept away by the scale of the disaster.

28 By the late 1990s there was no social capital to be gained from declaring yourself a devout Catholic. Young people, who had come out in record numbers to welcome the Pope to Ireland in 1979, departed in droves and ordinations to the priesthood subsequently collapsed. During the period when the Industrial Schools thrived, what is apparent then is that a bargain of sorts was struck between most priests and Christian Brothers on the one side and the State on the other – each side served their own purposes. The religious orders could be called on to perform the onerous tasks in society for a price, to perform the rituals that perpetuated the *status quo* in return for certain social and monetary benefits.

29 The cache of having a son in the priesthood or religious orders was sufficient for many parents to thrust their children into a vocation, irrespective of whether or no they had a calling. This led to the situation where men, who had no childcare training and no inclination towards the celibate life, found themselves taking charge of vulnerable or troubled children. The cache of being in the religious orders was contrasted with the stigma of leaving those orders and thus, many men remained solely for reason of social propriety. Their frustration was subsequently taken out on their charges and the State, unwilling to intervene, inadvertently contributed to the abuse of countless minors in the care of the Religious Orders. This arrangement helped perpetuate the symbolic order for a further thirty years, from the nineteen-sixties to the early nineties but each

side was obliged to keep up a façade of sorts. Propriety was key and it was a cosy relationship but with the deluge of scandals in the nineties the Church could no longer perform in this role. They were utterly discredited and most people found that they could operate well enough without them anyhow, turning their attention to the vulgar accruement of commodities instead. Shortly after the airing of the documentary entitled *States of Fear* in 1999, the journalist Mary Kenny wrote:

> The scale of the cruelty seemed so systematic that it was as though it was inherent in our history: not only were the religious who ran these institutions accused before the bar of history, so was the Irish State, which utterly failed to take responsibility for those in its care. So, indeed, were the complacent middle classes, who used these reformatories as a source for servants, and so too was the media, which remained indifferent to the punitive regimes around them[28].

30 There are no positive portrayals of the Industrial Schools, in either the fictive or biographical accounts. They were a place of punishment and brute adversity and those who were sent there suffered needlessly at the hands of people who were charged with their well-being. From our reading of the Ryan Report, we understand that the Brother's were ill-equipped to act as surrogate caregivers to these children – they were conscious that the prevailing mood was for discipline and conformity and they acted in accordance to established directives. From our reading of these accounts, we become aware that the public were equally adapted to an established and unquestioning orthodoxy. As we saw with McGahern's fiction, the former inmates were groomed for subordinate role in our society and as we have seen with Macken and McCabe, they spent their life coping and often failing to live with the stigma. In October 2001, the journalist John Waters faced considerable approbation for suggesting that many children sent to industrial schools in the 1950s and 1960s had criminal backgrounds. Waters wrote an editorial in *Magill* that cast doubt on the Laffoy Commission, which was set up to investigate abuse of children by industrial schools in the 1950s and 1960s. The most contested part of the article questioned the motives of the "alleged victims" of abuse, since "many will have been young offenders with all the baggage and possible motivation that this might imply". These were people, it continued, "who, as adolescents at least, had a history of disturbance or even criminal activity[29]."

31 Department of Education statistics show that just 6 per cent of children admitted to industrial schools through the courts had committed any kind of offence. Of that number, half were under 12 and would scarcely be considered criminal by today's standards. Waters, however, stood by his argument and said, "I don't claim to be pious but we are developing a culture where there is an omnipotent victim, an atmosphere where it is impossible for anyone to suggest the possible innocence of the accused." Waters' central point is that people who worked in industrial schools are being scapegoated by the society that sanctioned abuses in the first place. This is an essential point. Abuse cannot thrive without at least some form of social acceptance and in places like Letterfrack, where bystanders witnessed this abuse first hand, nothing was done. The climate of the time prevented direct action from taking place and it difficult now to fully appreciate the changing dimension of social concern which occurred over the period. What was thinly acceptable thirty years ago would, today, be held up as horrific. The accounts that I have spoken of, in both the fictive and biographical treatment of the Schools, are united in dismay and disgust at the way in which those institutions were run, but clearly they were run according to a prevailing climate and

sanctioned by a larger community than the Christian Brothers. Eamon Maher suggests that:

> This is exactly what the Irish Church is going to have to do; find "glory in its humiliation", admit its past failings and set about rebuilding trust and confidence and renewing its commitment to the example of Jesus Christ. Perhaps when it does this, the victims whose horrors are chronicled in the Ryan Report will find some solace[30].

32 But I think it is equally important that the society, the town, the community, the household and indeed the individual who tolerated abuse come to terms with what occurred not by a simple *mea culpa* but through the appreciation of what happens when we abrogate our moral responsibility. As McGahern dictates, the students who witnessed the thrashing of the boy in *That they May Face The Rising Sun* feel the repercussions of the event the rest of their lives, condemned by their own self-protective silence. And I feel the same way every time I return home to a community still under the pall of its own horrific past. The responsibility begins with ourselves.

NOTES

1. Bruce Arnold, *The Irish Gulag*, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 2009, p. 2.

2. Fintan O'Toole, "Law of Anarchy, Cruelty of Care", in *The Irish Times*, Saturday May 23rd, 2009, *Weekend Review*, p. 1.

3. Eamon Maher, "Reflections of a Layman on the Ryan Report", in Tony Flannery (ed.) *Responding to the Ryan Report*, Dublin, Columba, 2008.

4. Mannix Flynn, *Nothing to Say*, Dublin, Ward River Press, 1983, p. 171.

5. Paddy Doyle, *The God Squad*, Dublin, Raven Arts, 1988, p. 10.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

8. Patrick Touher, *Fear of the Collar: Artane Industrial School*, Dublin, O'Brien, 1991, p. 35.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

10. Bernard McLaverty, *Lamb*, New York, Norton, 1992, p. 12.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

12. Walter Macken, *The Bogman*, London, Pan, 1981, p. 11.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

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ABSTRACTS

The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (CICA) is one of a range of measures introduced by the Irish Government to investigate the extent and effects of abuse on children from 1936 onwards. It is commonly known in Ireland as the Ryan Commission after its chair, Justice Seán Ryan. The Commission's remit was to investigate all forms of child abuse in Irish institutions for children; the majority of allegations it investigated related to the system of sixty residential "Reformatory and Industrial Schools" operated by Catholic Church orders, funded and supervised by the Irish Department of Education. This essay examines the critical reaction to the revelations and the correlation between the Irish Industrial Schools and the Soviet labour camp system. The appellation "The Irish Gulag" was coined by the journalist and critic Bruce Arnold and is apt, for as I demonstrate there are a number of parallels between the memoirs of former prison inmates in the Soviet Union and those who wrote about their experience in the Irish Industrial Schools. As a contrast, I also draw upon fictive accounts of life in the schools by writers such as Bernard McLaverty and John McGahern.

La Commission d'enquête sur la maltraitance des enfants (ICCA) est l'une des mesures mises en place par le gouvernement irlandais pour enquêter sur l'ampleur et les effets des abus sur les enfants à partir de 1936. Elle est connue en Irlande sous le nom de Commission Ryan : cette commission a été chargée d'enquêter sur toutes les formes de violence perpétrées dans les institutions irlandaises pour enfants, la majorité des allégations sur laquelle porte l'enquête étant liées au système des soixante institutions appelées « Reformatory » ou « Industrial Schools » dirigées par des ordres catholiques et financées et supervisées par le ministère irlandais de l'Éducation. Cet article examine la réaction critique suite aux révélations et opère un rapprochement entre les écoles industrielles irlandaises et le système de travail des camps soviétiques. L'expression « Les Irlandais du Goulag » a été inventée par le journaliste et critique

Bruce Arnold et elle est pertinente : on montrera qu'il existe un certain nombre de parallèles entre les mémoires des anciens détenus dans l'Union soviétique et ceux qui ont écrit sur leur expérience dans les Industrial schools irlandaises. On s'appuiera aussi sur les récits fictifs de la vie dans ces écoles par des écrivains comme Bernard McLaverty et John McGahern.

INDEX

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